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ABSTRACT

This curriculum guide is designed to assist teachers in developing a world literature course exploring the modern literature of four cultures: North America, Latin America, the Middle East, and India. The course begins with the study of North America, the language, history, culture and religion and the literature resulting from those factors. By examining how literature reflects or does not reflect our culture, students will be better situated to evaluate the distance between art and life in other cultures. The course proceeds to Latin America, Egypt, West Africa, Zimbabwe, and India and their respective literature. (EH)

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(Almost) Around the World in (Almost) 180 Days: A Plan for Designing a World Literature Course

by

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A Curriculum Project Developed During the 1996
Fulbright-Hays Seminar Abroad Program: India Seminar

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Rosalie Gendimenico

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Melissa Kantor
November 1996

Background

My intention in applying to Fulbright for a grant was to find a way to include Indian literature in all my classes (teachers at Saint Ann's teach grades 4 through 12) in one way or another. I was interested in "dotting" my curricula with India, insuring that each student I have be touched by the sub-continent in one way or another. Though that idea is one I am not yet prepared to discard, a lecture given by Professor Choudhury lead me to re-think my original plan.

Professor Choudhury spoke to the Fulbright group twice, once on the Epics and again on modern Indian literature. During the second lecture, he pointed out that the American (western) approach to teaching literature of non-western civilizations is flawed in that it uses the literature of these countries as anthropological studies of the countries themselves. He invited us to imagine teaching the short stories of John Cheever as a means to understand American culture in the 1950's. While Cheever did, to a certain extent, describe and write about a "real" culture, one would certainly miss much of the magic of his writing by studying him as a sociologist. (Not to mention the flawed notions one would come away with in studying a society with the assumption that art imitates life.)

At the same time as I want to avoid the trap of studying literature in terms of its ability to teach about an "other," teaching literature of other cultures within the paradigm of established western aesthetics is also risky. Beauty may be truth and truth beauty, but both are relative, and it is rare that either of these concepts crosses the boundaries of language and culture. Not only do stories lose much in literal translation, trying to evaluate a foreign author's use of time, character, dramatic structure and

metaphor by applying *our* understanding of these things often means missing much of a text's power.

Thus, not only does one need to understand the nuts and bolts of a foreign culture in order to understand that culture's literature, it is also important that the reader have at least a rudimentary understanding of that culture's aesthetic norms. Ideally, one would read, critique and evaluate the literature of a country only to the degree that it is possible to do so from within that country's own aesthetic framework.

Easier said than done, of course. We cannot be born and raised Indian, Iraqi, Colombian and Japanese. And, luckily, it is not necessary that we be completely immersed in a culture if we want to study that culture's art (few of us lose sleep over the fact that we are studying *Romeo and Juliet* despite having never lived in 17th century England). However, I would argue that when a culture is as radically different from our own as, say, India is from the United States, one must first embark on a plan to teach that culture if one is committed to teaching that culture's art.

The First Plan

At Saint Ann's, high school juniors and seniors pick their English classes from a menu of electives, courses designed by the English department to both provide variety for students and to enable the teacher to pursue an area in which he or she has a particular interest. Recent course titles include: *American Literature; Wanderlust: Writing the Experience of Travel; The Literature of the Family; Coming of Age; Creative Writing; Literature of Religion; and Monsters and Madness: The Gothic Novel and its Legacy.* Electives are designed to be focused enough to enable students to develop an area of expertise (more or less) but general

enough to insure that within each elective students study different literary styles, genres and eras.

Initially, I planned to teach a course called *Around the World in 180 Days* and to pick one novel from each of approximately nine countries (including India). As you can imagine, Professor Choudhury's lecture made this ideas seem quite...flawed. I decided that the only thing to do was to teach a year-long course on Indian Literature. However, that seems a bit premature. Despite the fact that spending six weeks in India made me feel like I am quite the little expert on the country (just ask anyone who's met me at a cocktail party recently), I realize that without extensive study of the literary tradition of the country, I am really not equipped to teach a class that spans the thousands of years from the *Vedas* to *Freedom at Midnight*. My Fulbright experience whetted my appetite to study Indian literature further, and once I have had the opportunity to do so, I plan to design such a course. For now, however, I must be content with a compromise.

The Second Plan

This is how I came up with my newest course title and description:

<u>(Almost) Around the Modern World in (Almost) 180 Days:</u>

This course will seek to explore the modern literature of four cultures of the world (North America, Latin America, the Middle East and India) by looking at the societies and cultures out of which that literature is born. Beginning with North America, we will explore the language, history, culture and religion of our "home turf" and the literature that they have engendered (titles will include *Light in August* and *The Great Gatsby*). By looking at how our literature reflects (and does not reflect) our culture, we will (hopefully) be better situated to evaluate the distance between art

and life in other cultures. We will then go south and study the world of Latin America in the 1950's and 1960's before reading titles including *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *The Death of Artemio Cruz.* From Colombia we will head east to Egypt with *Children of the Alley.* Then it is onto west Africa and *The Joys of Motherhood.* We will complete our African tour with the Zimbabwean novel *Nervous Condition.* Finally we will arrive in India, and there we will read *The Shadow Lines* and *Midnight's Children.* The course will conclude with E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India.*

The Structure

Each unit of the course will begin with a poem or a piece of art work from the region being discussed and an attempt to arrive at some broad conclusions about the aesthetics of that culture. My hope is that by starting close to home (I plan to begin the class with a contemporary American poem), we will begin to develop a vocabulary with which to discuss the distance between art and life, while also beginning to see the ways in which the two are intrinsically linked. For each region we will begin with a brief overview of the history of that region. Using fiction, non-fiction and audio visual aids, I will help the students to get a feel for each culture.

India

I am going to begin the unit on India with (of course) a slide of the NAT RAJA. This image is crucial for many of the themes the students will see in Indian art, and we will discuss its importance as a religious icon, a work of art, an historical artifact, a mythical symbol and a religious icon used in present-day worship. I am hoping that by beginning with this multifaceted symbol, discussions of India will be discussions of integration, of the collapse of dualities that we (as westerners) see as diametrically

opposed. To discuss the Nat Raja is to discuss so many elements of Indian society, culture, religion and history that it seems the perfect entry into this ancient and infinitely complex world.

I want to move from the sculpture to Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*. Though the novel is too long to do in its entirety, the opening chapter is a vivid and wonderful description of a modern Indian wedding. The families of the bride and groom are tremendously conflicted about the union of the couple even as they are optimistic about the future happiness of the bride and groom. Seth's novel presents post-Independence-urban India with insight and humor.

The opening story in Narayan's *Malgudi Days* ("The Astrologer's Globe") is a very funny tale of chance and destiny in rural India. Comparing *A Suitable Boy* with "The Astrologer's Globe" will provide the students with an opportunity to see two extremes of Indian society and to begin to understand how incredible it is that there is unity within a culture as diverse as India's. With neither Seth or Narayan am I hoping to make an "aesthetic point;" I am merely hoping to provide two texts that will invite a discussion of India's history post-Independence and it's modern culture. Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* is the story of a young Indian civil servant's distress when he leaves his urban home to work in the provinces. Again, excerpts from the novel will provide the chance to discuss how complicated a country India is and how "everything you hear about India is true" and yet "the opposite is also true."

Ultimately, I am hoping that students will emerge from the first part of the unit on India with an ability to hold two seemingly contradictory ideas about India simultaneously: India is a country of radical opposites. It is also a country that is somehow unified and cohesive.

Once we have completed the introduction (which will include slides, music, excerpts from the *Vedas* and Tagore's canon, Jhabvala's "The Englishwoman," excerpts from Naipal's *An Area of Darkness*, food tasting - yum - and sari tying) to India, we will focus on two novels: Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadowlines* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

The Shadowlines is the story of a boy growing up in Calcutta who is deeply influenced by his cosmopolitan cousin's world travels. The book is about boundaries, both the ones that nations draw to define their borders and the ones that individuals draw to define themselves. The novel plays with the reader's need to locate himself in space and time; it moves from London to Calcutta, from past to present without explanation and demonstrates many of the non-western aesthetic ideals that I think we will have come to accept as "normal" by this point.

Midnight's Children is the story of the children born at the instant India achieves her independence. It, too, is a complex novel. It, too, plays with ideas of time, identity, space and nationality. Not only does Rushdie paint a glorious picture of Indian society in all of its complex glory, the novel is an aesthetic playground. I hope that the students will see it as a glorious conclusion, a chance to read a novel as a sociological study, an aesthetic masterpiece and an "international" work of art.

Finally, I am thinking about ending the course with Forster's *A Passage to India*. I am still up in the air on this. On the one hand, it seems a shame to come back to Europe after our glorious travels in the east. On the other hand, I think that the students would enjoy seeing India through the eyes of an Englishman who is trying to see India through the eyes of an Indian. Ultimately, time may prove to be the deciding factor. Perhaps we will settle on the movie.

The End

There are a myriad ways to organize a course like the one I have outlined above. Ultimately, I chose the regions/countries I did because they are places I have spent extensive periods of time (except for Latin America, which I chose because of previous course work). Obviously, one could include Chinese, Irish or eastern European literature, depending on one's area of expertise.

I am hoping that by combining history, sociology and anthropology with discussions of literature and aesthetics, this course will enable students to appreciate more deeply art that is initially unfamiliar to them.